

THE FLYING MAN

by Lisa Rovner



BASE jumping is a revolutionary sport that has captured the imagination of millions. It involves jumping off of a category of fixed objects: buildings, antennas, spans (bridges) and earth (cliffs), and flying through the air wearing a wingsuit. The suits are made of ripstop nylon, a fabric with zero porosity, which allows the wings to remain rigid in flight. As early as 1891, "birdmen" such as Otto Lilienthal, Clem Sohn and Leo Valentin pushed the boundaries of the human body and attempted to fly like birds. Most of them fell to their deaths. In the late 1990s, Patrick de Gayardon, one of the world's most famous skydivers, built the first truly successful wingsuit. Technological advances mean that wingsuit jumpers are more likely to survive today. All extreme athletes push themselves to the edge, but as one writer remarked, only one steps over it. That would be Jeb Corliss, one of the most accomplished wingsuit flyers alive. In conversation with Lisa Rovner at his home in Venice, California, he proclaimed, "The only thing standing between dream and reality is oneself."

LISA ROVNER: Let's start at the beginning. In a clip I saw on YouTube, your mother recounts how you took to high diving at 18 months. Do you have any memories of that?
JEB CORLISS: No, but my mom has told the story so many times that I have imagined memories of it. My mom had been taking me to swimming lessons for some time. Apparently, I had been bothering her and the swim coach about the high dive. I wouldn't leave them alone about it. The coach convinced my mom to let him take

me up there; he thought I'd get scared. He took me to the edge and the second he let go of me I jumped off. I hit the water, my diaper fell off, I swam over to the edge and said one word: again.

Did you dream about flying as a child?

Of course. I've dreamt about flying my entire life.

How different is reality from the dream?

In my dreams, it's not so windy. When you're flying in proximity to the ground, it feels very similar to dreams. It's impossible to explain the feeling, but dreaming of flying is the closest you'll come to feeling it without doing it.

Was it the dream of human flight, sci-fi movies, Superman comics, or something else that motivated you to try BASE jumping and start wingsuit flying?

I watched birds do it and always dreamt of flying like them. When I was 16, I saw someone do a BASE jump in a documentary and it was like I got shocked by electricity. It became an obsession.

You are credited as one of the most experienced wingsuit BASE jumpers. How many jumps have you made?

I stopped counting back in 1999, when I knew I had done enough jumps to know that I really liked it.

Wingsuit flying is not for everyone. What kind of skills would you say are necessary to be able to do what you do?

In order to fly wingsuits off cliffs and do proximity flying,

you have to spend years of your life training, preparing and learning. It takes an enormous amount of passion. Physically, it isn't really that demanding; it's mostly psychological. It comes down to dedication. The more you do, the better you get and the more you can do. The best BASE jumpers and wingsuit flyers tend to be the most experienced.

I've heard you talk about being diagnosed with counterphobia. Counterphobia comes from the Latin for "opposed to" or "against" and the Greek "phobos," meaning fear. Do you think it makes you a better BASE jumper?

People think I have some superpower, but I don't. The first time I jumped out of a plane, I was so scared I almost passed out. Doctors like to label everything. To me, it sounds like a completely made-up disorder. I don't believe it's a real thing.

A lot of BASE jumpers use creative visualization, a technique frequently used by athletes to enhance their performance. Do you visualize before you jump?

Every time. Sometimes I visualize for years before I jump. It's probably the single most important thing you can do if you want to make something happen.

It all looks so improvised, but each jump is meticulously planned out. Do you have a coach? Is there such a thing as a wingsuit flying coach?

Yes, they have come into existence, but really you learn from experience and your peers. The better jumpers you are around, the better you become.

How do you pick the places you will jump from?

I could write an entire book just about that. I've done so many BASE jumps that now it needs to mean something. The more complicated, the more difficult, the more people think it can't be done, the more interested I am in doing it.

You've explained the moment before you jump as feeling like there's "a hurricane inside your head."

The real terror of BASE jumping is not the actual act, but the anticipation before the jump, when you can still not do it. But once you step off that cliff, the fear evaporates. You focus on what you have to do to survive.

Wingsuit flying is radical, but proximity flying—flying as close to the land as possible—is even more so. I've read that you feel more speed. Is that what drew you to it?

No. Really what you get is a sense of flying. If you want to go fast, go ride a motorcycle. If you want to feel what it's like to fly, get in a wingsuit.

You have such a privileged relationship with nature in proximity flying.

Oh yeah, you feel an incredible connection with nature. That's one of the things that draws people to it. It's just such a beautiful experience.

When the parachute opens, do you feel relief?

I wouldn't say that. Actually, in most instances, the opening is the scariest part because that's when things can go really wrong. Now you've got to land without getting hurt. Landing is usually a pretty big relief though.

The difference between failure and success is doing a thing nearly right and doing it exactly right. What do you attribute your success to? Is luck part of it?

Yes, luck is definitely involved, but a good jumper is a jumper who relies on skill more than luck. Eventually, you are going to run out of luck and all you'll have left to keep you alive is your experience.

The danger of human flight is warned of in the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus. Do you identify more with Icarus, who burned his wings by flying too close to the sun, or with Daedalus, his father, who with caution, landed safely?

I've had quite a few accidents based on my arrogance, so maybe Icarus is a better description. A lot of the accidents came from my willingness to push harder than I should. With age, I'm learning how to control that monster that wants to just go hard. Every now and then, I have a tendency to overstep. I've been very fortunate. I'm still alive, and I'm still able to jump.

You have lost many friends; all jumpers have. Does losing friends like that not make you reconsider the sport?

Of course when one of your good friends dies, you can't help but question things. But even if I stop BASE jumping, one day, no matter what, I will die. I would rather spend 36 years doing what I love than spend 80 years hiding. I don't want to live life in a padded room.

You have had some pretty crazy accidents. Benjamin Franklin said, "Things that hurt, instruct." Do you agree?

It's one of the best things I've heard. You learn from pain.

Can you talk about how technology has changed the sport?

It's a 100% technology-based sport. BASE jumping, wingsuit flying, skydiving—we need technology. As the technology gets better, we get better.

How do you foresee the future of wingsuit flying? Do you think it's too dangerous to become accredited by international sports foundations?

Honestly, proximity flying is bigger than sports. Sports are games that have no consequences. BASE jumping, wingsuit flying—these things are ways of thinking; ways of being. I don't see it as a sport. I see it as a philosophy. To call it sport is to belittle it. Of course it will never be safe, but part of the draw is the fact that there is danger in it. The first races are coming. They're going to be judged on accuracy, going through gates, speed and time. These kinds of competitions are good because they inspire. In the end, that's what all athletes do; they inspire. ♦